Indian Classical Languages: Preserving Heritage in a Modern World

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Abstract: **This article explores the significance of Indian classical languages in preserving the nation's rich cultural heritage within a modern context. Recognized for their historical and literary importance, languages such as Tamil, Telugu, and Bengali serve as vital links to India's ancient traditions, folklore, and religious practices. The article discusses various government initiatives aimed at promoting and safeguarding these languages, including their inclusion in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution and the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which emphasizes mother-tongue education. Additionally, it highlights cultural celebrations and events that foster linguistic unity and promote cultural exchange. The recognition of classical languages not only encourages scholarly research and the preservation of ancient texts but also aims to make these languages globally competitive. By examining the interplay between language, culture, and modernity, this article underscores the importance of sustaining India's linguistic diversity as a means of fostering national identity and cultural pride in an increasingly globalized world.**

Keywords: **Classical Languages, Language Preservation, Cultural Identity, Government Initiatives, Multilingual Education, Language Promotion Strategies.**

1. INTRODUCTION

A classical language is a prestigious and often ancient language with an independent literary tradition and a significant body of ancient written literature. These languages are typically associated with a "golden age" of cultural and literary achievement, often serving as models for subsequent languages and literary traditions.

The classification of a language as classical aims to honour its historical importance and its role in safeguarding Bharat's rich cultural and intellectual legacy. These languages have played a crucial part in maintaining and sharing India's ancient knowledge, philosophies, and values over thousands of years. By designating these languages as classical, the government acknowledges their long history, extensive literary traditions, and their essential role in the nation's cultural identity. This recognition emphasizes the significant contributions these languages have made to India's heritage. It will enhance their status and support initiatives for promoting, preserving, and researching these languages, ensuring they remain relevant in today's world.

Fig 1. Linguistic India

Recognizing languages as classical encourages scholarly research, preservation, and the revitalization of ancient texts and knowledge systems, which are essential to India's intellectual and cultural identity. Furthermore, it instils a sense of pride and ownership among the speakers of these languages, promoting national integration and aligning with the broader vision of a self-reliant and culturally rooted India.

In 2004, the Government of India, for the first time, created a new category of languages known as *Classical Languages*. It set the following as criteria for the status of Classical Language:

- High antiquity of its early texts/ recorded history over a thousand years.
- A body of ancient literature/ texts, which is considered a valuable heritage by generation of speakers.

- The literary tradition must be original and not borrowed from another speech community.[1]

This criterion was revised in 2005 and 2024 based on the recommendations of Linguistic Experts Committees (LEC) under Sahitya Akademi to examine the proposed languages for the status of Classical Language.

The criteria were revised in November 2005 as follows, and Sanskrit was declared a Classical Language:

- High antiquity of its early texts/recorded history over a period of 1500-2000 years.
- A body of ancient literature/texts, which is considered a valuable heritage by generations of speakers.
- The literary tradition must be original and not borrowed from another speech community.
- The classical language and literature being distinct from modern, there may also be a discontinuity between the classical language and its later forms or its offshoots. [1]

The criteria were revised in 2024 as follows:

- High antiquity of its early texts/recorded history over a period of 1500- 2000 years.
- A body of ancient literature/texts, which is considered a heritage by generations of speakers.
- Knowledge texts, especially prose texts in addition to poetry, epigraphical and inscriptional evidence.
- The Classical Languages and literature could be distinct from its current form or could be discontinuous with later forms of its offshoots. [1]

So far, six Indian languages namely Tamil, Sanskrit, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam and Odia were earlier accorded the status of Classical Language. The Union Cabinet chaired by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi has approved to confer the status of Classical Language to Marathi, Pali, Prakrit, Assamese and Bengali languages on October 03, 2024, thus bringing the total number of classical languages to 11.

Table 1.1- Declaration of classical languages [1]

Language	Date of Recognition
Tamil	October 12, 2004
Sanskrit	November 25, 2005
Telugu	October 31, 2008
Kannada	October 31, 2008
Malayalam	August 8, 2013

Odia	March 1, 2014

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

India's linguistic and literary heritage is as vast and diverse as the country itself. with over 1,600 languages spoken across the subcontinent, India's linguistic landscape is a mosaic of languages belonging to different families, each with its own unique history and cultural significance. The development of Indian languages and literature illustrates the intricate interactions of cultural, religious, and social factors that have influenced the nation throughout its extensive history.[2]

India, boasting a population exceeding 900 million and over a thousand languages, stands out as one of the most multilingual countries globally. It is primarily associated with the Indo-Aryan and Dravidian language families, which are among the largest in the world. Additionally, languages from the Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman families are present, albeit spoken by a smaller number of individuals in comparison to the other two families. This rich linguistic diversity is a testament to India's extensive and varied historical background. According to the Census of India 2011, there are 22 officially recognized languages (the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution) and hundreds of other languages and dialects spoken across the country.[2]

Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar, in his article *The Evolution of Indian Languages,* states that "Regarding the classical languages, they should be taught not as treasures or treatises of past history or analysis but as a common link to humanity, a binding tether of human hopes, of the emancipation of humanity in general. Some ancient languages do not come within the scope of the classics, like Saṁskrta for example. Saṁskrta is a classical subject as well as an ancient language. It is the mother of all the mother languages of South Asia and Southeast Asia. All North Indian languages and South Indian languages like Oriya, Marathii and Konkoni are of Saṁskrtic origin. Regarding the five Dravidian languages, including Kannada, Tamil, Malayalam and Telegu, their pronouns, verb endings and case endings are of old Dravidoid tongue, but their vocabularies are demi-Sanskritic. These languages use old Dravidoid and Sanskritic vocabularies, but the percentage of Saṁskrta words varies from 7% in Tamil to 74% in Malayalam. Old Tamil is 5000 years old. It is a very old language".

Northern India is predominantly characterized by Indo-Aryan languages such as Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi,

Bengali, Gujarati, and Marathi, each boasting rich literary traditions that span centuries. Hindi literature has evolved from ancient epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* to medieval Bhakti poetry by saints like Kabir and Tulsidas, culminating in the modern era with writers like Munshi Premchand, who addressed social issues and human emotions. Urdu literature, especially renowned for its ghazals and nazms, has seen contributions from legendary poets like Mirza Ghalib and Allama Iqbal, often exploring themes of love, philosophy, and society. Bengali literature is equally distinguished, with figures like Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel laureate of 1913, enriching its vast array of poetry, novels, and short stories, reflecting the intellectual and cultural vibrancy of the region. [3]

Southern India is home to the Dravidian languages, including Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam, each with a rich literary tradition. Tamil, one of the world's oldest classical languages, boasts a literary heritage spanning over two millennia, with Sangam literature as a cornerstone and modern works exploring contemporary social themes. Telugu literature thrived during the Vijayanagara period, with poets like Allasani Peddana and Nannayya shaping its development through poetry, drama, and prose. Kannada literature, with its deep historical roots, is renowned for 12th-century Vachana literature by saint-poets like Basava and Akka Mahadevi, emphasizing philosophical and social reformist themes. Malayalam literature, known for its lyrical poetry and modernist narratives, features influential figures like Kumaran Asan and Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, whose works reflect Kerala's socio-political changes and cultural evolution. [3]

Some initiatives taken by Government

Union Minister Shri G Kishan Reddy highlighted that classical languages, which safeguard India's ancient cultural heritage, have also received focused attention. The government has consistently worked to grant classical language status to ancient languages, reflecting their historical and cultural pride. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Union Cabinet approved the designation of Marathi, Pali, Prakrit, Assamese, and Bengali as classical languages in October 2024, increasing the total number to 11. India is now the only country in the world to have recognized 11 classical languages. To promote these languages, several initiatives have been taken, such as establishing three Central Universities for Sanskrit in 2020, setting up the

Central Institute of Classical Tamil for research and translation, and creating special study centres for Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam, and Odia under the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore. National and international awards, university chairs, and special centres have been instituted to encourage achievements in this field.[4]

The Ministry of Education has taken various steps for advancing Classical Languages. In 2020, three Central Universities were established through an Act of Parliament to promote Sanskrit. The Central Institute of Classical Tamil was created to facilitate translating ancient Tamil texts, promoting research, and offering courses for university students and language scholars. To further enhance the study and preservation of Classical Languages, the Centres for Excellence for studies in Classical Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam, and Odia were established under the auspices of the Central Institute of Indian Languages in Mysuru. Additionally, several national and international awards have been introduced to recognize and encourage achievements in the field of Classical Languages. Other benefits provided by the Ministry of Education include National Awards for Classical Languages, university chairs, and centres dedicated to promoting Classical Languages.[1]

The Samskrit Promotion Foundation collaborates extensively with academic institutions and various non-governmental organizations to advance the study of Samskrit across all educational settings. Through a diverse array of courses, SPF aims to engage all segments of society. Additionally, SPF develops educational resources and teaching materials to encourage bright students to pursue the study of Samskrit. [5]

National Translation Mission (NTM) is a Government of India scheme to establish translation as an industry in general and, to facilitate higher education by making knowledge texts accessible to students and academics in Indian languages in particular. The vision is to create a knowledge society by transcending language barriers. NTM aims to disseminate knowledge in all Indian languages listed in the VIII schedule of the Constitution through translation.[6]

Shri Reddy said that the landmark National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, introduced under the Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership has been a transformative step in promoting Indian languages. The policy emphasizes teaching in the mother tongue or local language up to Class 5 and, wherever possible, up to Class 8. High-quality textbooks and

bilingual teaching methods have been recommended to enhance comprehension and intellectual development among students. NEP 2020 also encourages higher education institutions to provide courses in local languages and promotes the use of regional languages in STEM education and career counseling. Studies worldwide have shown that learning in one's mother tongue leads to better understanding, cognitive development, and confidence building. The policy also focuses on preserving tribal languages to safeguard India's indigenous cultures, benefitting children from tribal communities.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design
This study employs a quantitative survey method to collect structured data, enabling statistical analysis and generalization.

3.2 Population and Sampling
The target population consists of college students. A general survey was conducted, with 75 participants.

3.3 Survey Instrument
A structured questionnaire was used to gather demographic data and key insights.

3.4 Data Collection
The survey was administered via goggle forms over 2 weeks, ensuring voluntary participation and confidentiality.

3.5 Data Analysis
Descriptive and inferential statistics were applied to analyse quantitative data, while qualitative responses were thematically assessed.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The survey aimed to explore public perspectives on the importance of preserving classical languages, the awareness of existing initiatives, and the possible strategies for their promotion in modern society. The responses reflect both a strong appreciation for the cultural and intellectual significance of classical languages, as well as practical suggestions and concerns regarding their future.

When asked about the importance of preserving classical languages, a majority of respondents emphasized that these languages are deeply connected to cultural identity and contain valuable ancient knowledge. This highlights the understanding that classical languages are not only linguistic tools but also serve as living links to historical wisdom, philosophical thought, and cultural traditions that have shaped societies over time.

Why do you think preserving classical languages is important? (select maximum 2)
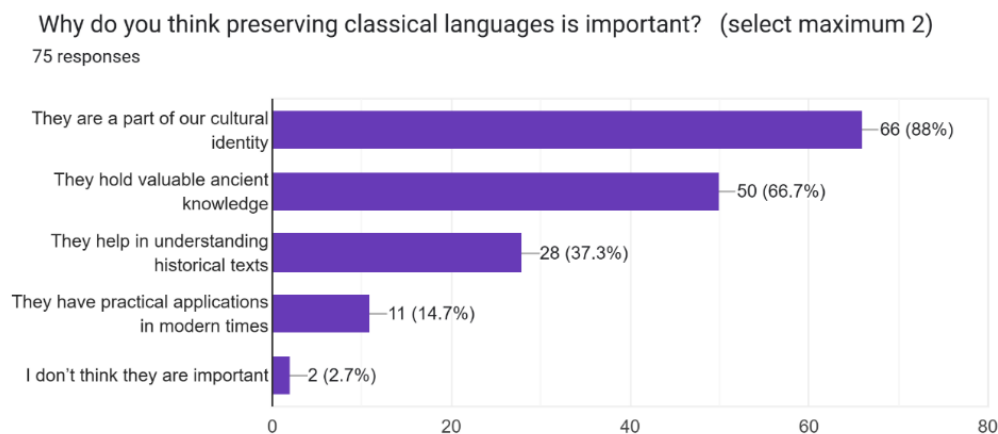75 responses

Fig 2. Survey Result -1

However, when the participants were questioned about their awareness of government initiatives for the preservation and promotion of classical languages, most admitted to having little or no knowledge of such programs. This suggests a clear gap between policy efforts and public engagement, underlining the need for better outreach and visibility of these initiatives.
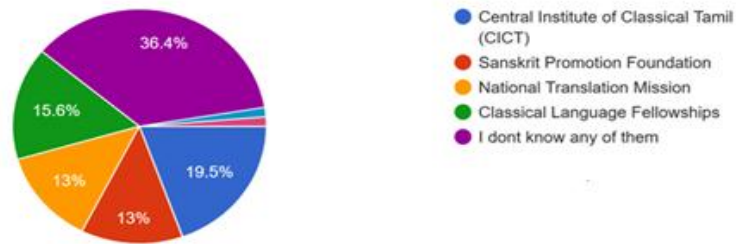
Fig 3. Survey Result-2

The survey also explored public opinions on the most balanced and effective ways to promote classical languages. A significant portion of the respondents suggested that adopting a multilingual education system, along with ensuring the equal promotion of all languages, could provide a more natural and sustained path for preserving classical languages. Rather than treating classical languages as isolated academic fields, integrating them into mainstream curricula was seen as a vital step in fostering interest and ensuring their relevance.
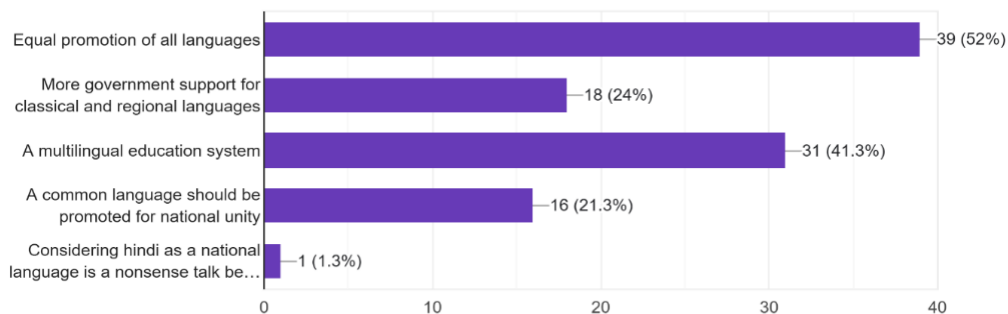

Fig 4. Survey Result-3

Additionally, many participants recommended modernizing the approach to promoting classical languages by leveraging digital platforms and incorporating them into popular culture. Suggestions included the use of classical languages in music, films, web content, and social media campaigns to make them more accessible and appealing to younger generations.
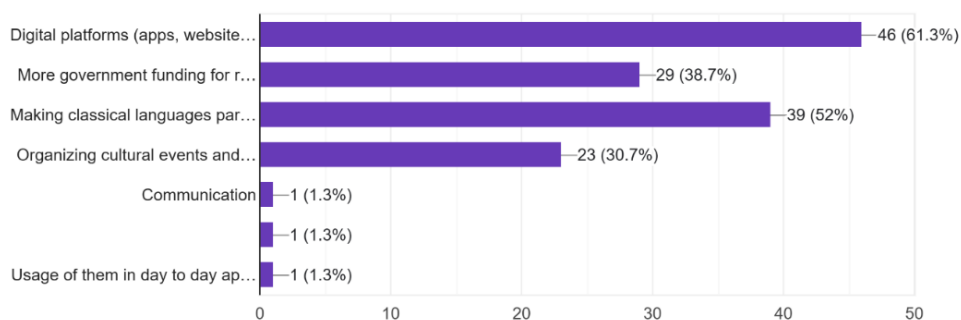

Fig 5. Survey Result -4

Finally, the survey revealed that the most common obstacles to the growth and preservation of classical languages are a general lack of awareness, declining interest, and limited career opportunities.

Respondents pointed out that without addressing these barriers, the efforts to revive and sustain classical languages may continue to face significant challenges in the contemporary world.

What challenges do you think hinder the promotion of classical languages today?
75 responses

- Lack of awareness and interest
- Limited career opportunities
- Lack of government initiatives
- Difficulty in learning these languages
- One common language should be there for a country so already every state is familiar with hindi excelt Tamil Nadu. If we go to any other state what will be t…
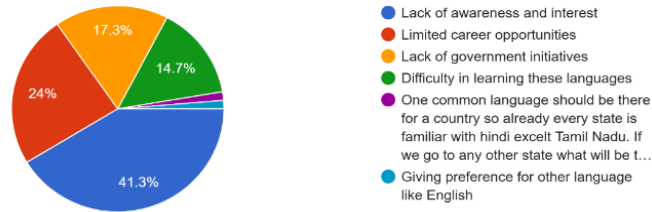- Giving preference for other language like English

Fig 6. Survey Result - 5

The survey findings suggest that while there is a clear public appreciation for the value of classical languages, effective preservation will depend on increasing awareness, integrating these languages into education and digital platforms, and creating more tangible opportunities for their practical use in modern life.

5. CONCLUSION

The survey findings highlight the crucial role of Indian classical languages in preserving cultural identity, historical knowledge, and traditional wisdom. These languages are not just relics of the past but continue to influence our daily lives through literature, philosophy, rituals, and linguistic roots in modern Indian languages. Their preservation is essential for maintaining a deep connection with India's rich heritage.

To ensure their survival, government initiatives must be increased, offering structured support through policies, education, and funding. While all classical languages should be given equal importance, adopting one language for unity can help foster national integration without diminishing linguistic diversity. A balanced multilingual education system can help students appreciate and learn these languages without overburdening them.

Additionally, integrating classical languages into digital platforms and pop culture can enhance their relevance in modern society, making them more accessible and appealing to younger generations. However, a lack of career opportunities and awareness remains a significant challenge. Creating professional avenues, educational reforms, and widespread awareness campaigns will be essential in overcoming these obstacles.

By recognizing the importance of classical languages in our daily lives and taking active steps to promote them, we can ensure they remain a vibrant and valuable part of India's cultural and intellectual landscape.

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